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RUEHEG/AMEMBASSY CAIRO IMMEDIATE 1095
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID IMMEDIATE 9071
RUEHNM/AMEMBASSY NOUAKCHOTT IMMEDIATE 6538
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS IMMEDIATE 2904
RUEHRB/AMEMBASSY RABAT IMMEDIATE 2548
RUEHTRO/AMEMBASSY TRIPOLI IMMEDIATE
RUEHTU/AMEMBASSY TUNIS IMMEDIATE 7401

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ALGIERS 001163

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/28/2018

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KDEM](#) [AG](#)

SUBJECT: BOUTEFLLIKA LAUNCHES CONSTITUTIONAL AMENDMENT
PROCESS

Classified By: DCM Thomas F. Daughton; reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (U) SUMMARY: President Abdelaziz Bouteflika announced on October 29 that he will convene a special session of parliament in the coming weeks to effect a partial and limited revision of the Algerian constitution. The changes he outlined would open the way for him to seek a third term as president. In a speech before the Constitutional Council and the senior judiciary, Bouteflika said he would propose measures to protect the symbols of the revolution, reorganize and clarify executive powers, and permit the people to exercise their right to choose their leaders. He also said the revisions would open the door to more women in government. While he gave no date for the special parliamentary session, sources tell us that the parliament has already formed a commission to establish rules and manage the session, and that members have been told they will be convoked on November 9. END SUMMARY.

FINALLY, A SIGNAL OF INTENT

¶2. (U) In a speech before the Constitutional Council at a ceremony launching the new judicial year, President Bouteflika announced that he would propose to parliament a set of revisions to the constitution "to enrich the institutional system with the fundamentals of stability, efficiency and continuity." Saying that he had "on multiple occasions" expressed his support to "review the constitution when circumstances permitted," Bouteflika tried to ease concerns about constitutional revision by asserting that "constitutions are the product of human effort" that should be "improved and perfected" because they are "the expression of the will of the people at a precise time in history." Specifically, he said, he will propose three measures to protect "the symbols of the glorious revolution that should not be touched, altered or manipulated; to "reorganize and clarify the prerogatives and relations between the elements of executive power without affecting the balance of powers"; and "to permit the people to exercise their legitimate right to choose their leaders and to renew them with confidence and complete sovereignty." He added that he would also propose a measure to "guarantee the political rights of women."

¶3. (C) His comments concerning executive reorganization and giving the people the right to "renew their leaders" were universally interpreted as a signal that Bouteflika will remove the existing presidential term limitation and allow himself to seek a third term. The reference to "symbols of the revolution" may refer to a series of recent assertions by the government that as many as 12,000 persons are erroneously receiving benefits reserved for fighters of the war of independence. In March, Bouteflika publicly promised to take

steps to increase the number of women in government, so a constitutional measure to this effect would fulfil that promise.

MOVING QUICKLY

14. (C) When asked after the speech when the parliament will meet to consider the constitutional revisions, Prime Minister Ouyahia was quoted on state radio as saying, "before the end of the month." Within an hour of the speech we were told by contacts in the parliamentary bureaucracy that MPs were already notified to be ready to assemble on November 9, and that a joint commission was being stood up on October 29 to formulate the rules governing the session.

I TRUST THE PEOPLE, BUT...

15. (U) Bouteflika said he would seek the revisions under Article 176 of the current constitution, which requires three-fourths approval by both houses of the parliament. He said he wouldn't hesitate "even for an instant to consult the people directly" regarding a constitutional revision, but "in light of experience from these recent years," and after having gauged the times and "interferences from different powers," he found it necessary to introduce certain urgent, corrective measures to guarantee the proper management of the affairs of state. Regarding a provision to guarantee the political rights of women, Bouteflika noted a need to enlarge women's representation at all levels of elected assemblies.

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COMMENT: LOOKING FOR A LEGACY

16. (C) Bouteflika first proposed to amend the constitution in 2005, suggesting he would do it through popular referendum. Talk of amendments abated when he became seriously ill in late 2005, only to revive a year later with his return to apparent health. Speculation has been rampant for over a year about when and how he would announce the actual process, with conventional wisdom saying in recent months that the approach of the presidential election in April 2009 meant there was no longer time for a referendum. Bouteflika chose to announce his intent to proceed with revision in a ceremony at the seat of the Constitutional Council, just two days before a national holiday marking the 54th anniversary of the beginning of the independence war against the French. He appears to have settled finally the question of whether he will seek a third term, as well as whether the constitution will be opened up for major changes. The limited focus of the changes he outlined matches the conservative and methodical style with which he has governed. The two provisions that will accompany the change to term limits almost seem designed to frame Bouteflika between the past, via the effort to enshrine the symbols of the Algerian revolution, and the future, by means of his attempt to fill a noticeable void of women leaders in Algeria. Bouteflika may finally be admitting that he is seeking to establish a legacy, but he has left key questions about centers of power and succession in limbo.

PEARCE